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Empowering Our Ministry: Fire in the Fireplace

Acts 2:37-47

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BACK TO MAIN SERMON PAGE

This morning I hope to begin a new kind of preaching. It's new to me and it will be new to you. Typically, ministers hover around three or four topics in their sermons, coming back again and again to the same three or four themes. Beginning today, I hope to branch out into an area that's basically different from my standard set of messages. You will see some similarity, and some challenge, and some teaching, but for me there is a new goal that has emerged, the goal of bringing God's empowerment into our ministry.

I'd like to suggest we take God at His word. When God says to us, in John 7, that if we come to Him and have a drink, have a cup of water, that out of us will flow rivers of living water, that a single drink is God-transformed into a flowing, gushing river; I believe we need to take this seriously. When God says to us, in James 5, that if the elders would gather around one who is sick, and anoint that one with oil, and pray a prayer of healing, that the person will be healed, that a person will be delivered from a spirit of cancer; I believe we would do well, from now on, to take God seriously in this. And when God says to us, in Ephesians 5, that we be filled with the Spirit, I believe we should take Him seriously in this, and be filled every day.

I became a Christian in 1971. It's important to be able to say it like that. It's important to be able to say that you decided to be Christ's person on such or such a day, or in such or such a month, or in such or such a year. It's important to be able to nail it down as close as you can, not because your salvation is a ticket with a time-stamp, but because knowing when you decided for Christ is equivalent to knowing that you did, in fact, make a decision.

The year before I accepted Christ, students at UCLA, UCSB, and at many other campuses, staged demonstrations in opposition to the Cambodian crisis in the context of the war in Vietnam. At UCLA, thousands thronged the approaches to the administration building. Placards bobbed up and down. In the distance, amidst a variety of political slogans, one sign featured four words: "Jesus Yes, Christianity No!" At the very least, that student was affirming something very positive about Jesus while rejecting the establishment called Christianity. Many people today share this ambiguity. They are repelled by the organized church with its programs and seeming irrelevance to the problems of society. Yet somehow they cannot escape the magnetic influence of Jesus Christ.

In a sense, the student with the sign was right. Much that passes for Christianity in our culture is not Christian. But this is not what Jesus intended. He promised His disciples, "I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). Yet, the churches inhabited by many good and loving and kind and generous people are not doing what Jesus intended, and are not taking Jesus or His word seriously. I am in the process of asking the elders of our church to read with me, and discuss with me, a paperback book that engages this issue of what our church has become and what our church is supposed to be. These discussions will be fruitful if our elders will be open to a new way of thinking. And I am asking you to be 'with me' for a different kind of preaching here on

Sunday mornings.

The most basic problem is that many churches have cut themselves off from the power of God. In the decades following His resurrection, the Christian community grew rapidly. Patterns of organization developed. Apostles inspired by the Holy Spirit wrote Gospels and letters which became the New Testament. Throughout the centuries Jesus Christ has been proclaimed by and known through His church. Yet many people, like the protesting student at UCLA in 1970, are not attracted to the church. The reason is that the accomplishing of the tasks of our churches has somehow been disconnected from the power of God, a power He promised and provided, a power He assumed we would use fully as we continued in the building of His church.

You see, every organism requires some degree of organization to channel its energy and fulfill its mission. It's natural for the church to develop confessions of faith, services of worship and programs of activity. Imperceptibly, however, the inner life tends to wane even though the outward form persists. Think of a fireplace as a metaphor. Raise your hand if you have a fireplace? No, not the pellet ones. Just raise your hand if you have a fireplace that burns wood. OK. Throughout church history the flame in many organizational fireplaces has flickered and gone low, and in some churches the flame has even died. Though the fireplace was designed to foster a blaze, accumulations of soot eventually clogged the flue and smothered the fire.

The history of human organizations shows a definite sequence. This is sometimes called the Four M's - Man, Movement, Method, and then Monument. First, a leader begins a new thing, a thing with vision and practicality. Second, the leader draws others into the vision, and these committed disciples develop a movement with distinctive patterns of activity, and a set method emerges. Then a second generation of leadership emerges. As the years go by, methods become inflexible and movement often becomes monument. So, think back to the fireplace metaphor. The fireplace may be magnificent, but sometimes only smoldering embers remain. A good example is the Salvation Army, which today is a pale image of the original.

Eventually another generation, feeling the cold, tries to rekindle the fire. Unfortunately, it doesn't burn well; the flue is clogged and the hearth no longer fosters a blaze. Yet the custodians of the fireplace often resist the cleaning or painful remodeling which is now necessary. Why? Because it's our soot, they say. We toiled for years to make things work around here, and the byproduct of our good and honorable labor was this soot, and we can't remove it without dishonoring our past. If you think it's cold in here, then for heavens sake, get a coat like we wear!

But the ones who are new (and cold) find they can't afford a new coat, and in principle don't see why they should have to put one on when the house has a perfectly good fireplace. So the kindlers of this new flame are tempted - or even forced? - to move their fire out into the middle of the floor. And then, one of two things happen: either the fire rages out of control, or its isolated coals die down for lack of a proper hearth. Raise your hands if you've seen this happen in a church. It's a tremendous waste of good spiritual energy, and a shame. Why?

Because the best place for a fire is in the fireplace. And if our fireplace at CPC needs to be cleaned, we will clean it. If it needs to be remodeled, we will remodel it.

I believe that God is leading us to become a different kind of church, the kind of church that prays a whole lot more than we do now, the kind of church where a spirit of boldness replaces a spirit of defensiveness, the kind of church where each person lives each day with a joyful sense of expectation about what God will do with them that very day, and can't wait to tell

something about what new thing God is doing!

I'm going to be talking a lot about the Holy Spirit. Although the Greek word for the Holy Spirit is in a neuter form, I'm going to refer to the Holy Spirit as 'he' because we don't have a gender-free pronoun in the English language. We have to remember that the Hebrew word we use much at Christmas, Immanuel, which means 'God with us,' refers primarily to the Holy Spirit, who Jesus said would come alongside us after He ascended to the Father. We haven't talked much about the Holy Spirit, either at CPC or in the Presbyterian Church, so we'll give Him some time.

And, along the way, we'll talk about taking God and His word more seriously than we have up to this point. And we'll do more than talk about it. We'll try it.

Acts 2:37-47 says a great deal, and eventually we'll get back to most of it in some detail, but for now I just want you to see what happened to that first body of believers. They heard God's word proclaimed, and it got through to them - it 'cut them to the heart.' They were so moved by the content of the preaching (not the eloquence of the preachers) that they had to respond with hearts and minds and souls. And then what happened? They grew incredibly fast. They began to live out Godly lives. They praised God and expected more blessing. And because of their dedication to the teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer, they were bold with the word of the Lord, and God added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

These people took God and His word seriously. They had an expectation that God would do amazing things in their midst, and so He did. This is the kind of church I hope we will become. And so, for the next half a year or so, I ask you to pray for me as I prepare these messages, and pray that we be open to an awakening of the Spirit

BACK TO MAIN SERMON PAGE

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